

The Nose

Jiarui Sun

When my mother was pregnant with me, her body became delicate. Three miscarriages in three years had snatched away the vitality that she, a normal 26-year-old woman, deserved. Even the slightest physical labor like reaching out for a box of egg rolls on the top of the fridge, caused serious bleeding. With the gynecologist's advice, she quit her job as a third grade math teacher and spent most of her time in bed from the twentieth day of pregnancy until I came out seven months later, no bigger than a rabbit, and was immediately put into an incubator.

The Chinese believed babies would have similar faces as the ones their mothers studied during pregnancy. Lying in bed with nothing much to do, my mom spent days and nights staring at baby pictures my dad bought from Xinhua Book Store, the only bookstore in our town back then. Thick eyebrows; big, watery, black eyes; a small red mouth; and white, soft skin. Even though she did not know the sex of the baby yet, she wanted to give the best she could get for it.

My mother's major concern was the skin problems passed down through her family line. All three girls in her family had freckles, which do not appear until the end of puberty, but once start, they soon crawl all over the face. The little brother, on the other hand, suffered from serious acne troubles since the first sprout of his moustache. She was almost sure that skin problems would be inevitable for her child. But she resolved to reduce the harm to the lowest degree. So she turned to Dr. Bai, her gynecologist, an expert in both Chinese medicine and Western clinical treatments, who suggested pearl

powders – fine, white powders in tiny little porcelain bottles smelled like rose – promising that it was good for the mother’s sleep and the baby’s skin.

Lying flat in bed did not guarantee a safe pregnancy. Occasional bleeding and pain still haunted my mother. During her days of staring at beautiful babies’ pictures, she took time to pour bowl after bowl of bitter, black medicine soup down her throat. Western medicine made her sick, so Dr. Bai had written prescriptions of Chinese herb medicine to assuage the symptoms while keep me safe. When older relatives came to visit, they frowned, “Silly girl, stop drinking that! The kid will be as black as coal.” When they went out of the door, they shook their heads. With a tone of sympathy, they whispered to Grandma Li, “Your daughter-in-law must be crazy. That amount of herb soups! The kid can be retarded. Oh, my Old Sister, what are you going to do if it has twelve fingers!” Even some gynecologists had suggested she give me up, based on unpromising tests. But my mother could not bear the idea of losing yet another baby. Dr. Bai was the only doctor who stayed optimistic about her pregnancy and whose medicine was the only way to save her from bleeding. So the bitter scent of herb soup stayed by her bedside lingering along with the restless whispers. Years later, when I was regarded as normal and healthy enough to be shown around, she let me visit those relatives with my father. When we got home, she would ask, almost casually, what did they say about my face, my grades, and, though she never said it out loud, my ten fingers.

I came into this world two months earlier than expected, at a time when my mom was in high fever and a caesarean birth became inevitable. Despite the burning fever in her head, my mother managed to ask the only question on her mind, “Are there ten fingers?” “Fingers and toes, ten and ten.” A nurse replied softly, “It’s a beautiful girl.

Look at that little mouth, just like yours.” My mother did not remember my face at that moment, but she did hear the nurse’s voice. Relieved, she let the anesthetic take over the rest of the day.

A few days later, when she finally saw me, she saw it. Yes, the mouth was beautiful, just like hers. Yes, the eyes were shiny. Yes, the skin was beautiful, pure white, whiter than any other infant she had ever seen. And double checked, the fingers and toes were all there, no more, no less. But what was wrong with the nose? Why was it so flat, so big, crawling over the very small infant face? Breathing, the nostrils grew even bigger and rounder, exposing the deep black hollow inside. They reminded her of the little hippos printed on one of the new baby blankets, of which she soon got rid in fear of the possibility that the formation of the newborn’s face had not yet finished. Did the nose have a bridge? Trembling, her fingers fumbled from the eyebrows to the part where the nose bridge was supposed to be. And there it was - a little bone underneath the tender skin. So she does have a nose bridge, she said to herself, almost embarrassed by her over-reaction. Maybe, she hoped, when the face grew bigger, the bridge would appear to be an elegant one, like a coral island comes to the surface of sea waters when the dry season arrives.

Still, she blamed my father for passing down that nose. Her own family had the best noses. They were high, pointy, and elegantly small. Who but her husband could destroy such a perfect gene? His nose was puffy and flat. When he smiled, it would across his face like a slug stretching its body over a leaf. But for all these years, she did not give much thought to it, not even when his nose was blue for three months after surgery to make the bridge high enough to hold a pair of glasses. When he proposed, she saw in his

honest eyes a reliable, bright man with a promising future at the best newspaper office in the city. Five years in their marriage, she saw his deft hands when he wallpapered their first home; she saw his beard burgeon in the morning and loved how it rubbed her cheeks; she saw his skinny chest and bought from the market the strongest chicken breast for his dinner. But now, all she could see in this man was his nose, that huge, greasy nose red like a rotten strawberry. How could she not see it? If she had ever seen it, she would, at least, have asked him to buy the pictures of those blond Western babies, so she could stare at those high, beautiful noses hard enough before the baby's was formed in her uterus without a better model.

“She looks exactly like her father!” Every visitor would say in a conventional compliment to the mother's virtue. But my mother shivered at these words, reaching out her arms to take me away from those eyes. One night, my father sat at her bedside with me in his arms. My mother watched as we smiled to each other, our noses spreading across our faces. “Peasant!” she blurted out and started to cry. Only poor peasants had rustic noses like that, for their flesh was made of pulpy clay. After all her efforts to save herself from the remote little town where she grew up and find a husband in the city, she had made up her mind to create a decent, urbane family. A girl from a fine family was supposed to be made of snow and roses. Now the disappointing nose gave her rustic roots away. My father was stunned, “You knew I was a farmer's descendant, didn't you?” She cried even harder.

When did my mother stop crying I did not know, but she refused to “get used to it” as others suggested when they learned about her misfortune. The nose was always on her mind. When she took me to the park, she let me touch the little putti sculptures' pointy

noses. When she walked me in a stroller, she put a translucent silk curtain on it, hiding my face from sunshine, which caused freckles, and mosquitos and, perhaps, our garrulous neighbors' judging eyes. She felt a little annoyed when they heartlessly raised the curtain to say hi to me. "The mosquitos are flying in!" Crying, she hastily pulled it down. When I lay in her arms, she would pick up my nose with a thumb and an index finger and squeeze gently, from the nose wings to the end of the nose bridge, then the other way around. "Flatty, flatty, grow, grow." she chanted. It became a ritual and, before I knew it, a serious mother duty.

The third summer after I was born, my mother got a job as a proof-reader at a local newspaper office, one that was smaller than my dad's employer but offering good money. When she was at work, Aunt Nana, a student at a normal school back then, was once my babysitter. On my mother's first day to work, she reminded Aunt Nana to squeeze *that* nose at least three times a day. She even taught her the incantation. But Aunt Nana took it even more seriously than my mother. She squeezed my nose and I giggled, spreading it flat again. Then, by pushing her two index fingers on each side, she formed an acute triangle on my face and demanded: "Smile." I spread my mouth. The nose remained pointy and small between her fingers. Aunt Nana was thrilled by this discovery. "You wanna be a beautiful princess?" She asked when I picked up a pink princess dress for my Barbie. I nodded. "You know a princess has a small nose, right?" I nodded. "So let's fix this." She rubbed my nose with her fingertips. I nodded. From our bathroom Aunt Nana found a clothing peg. She first tried to put it on my nose bridge, but it was too flat to be pegged. So she pegged my nose wings. "Breathe with your mouth, will you?" I nodded with my mouth open.

My mom was more amused than mad when she first got home and saw the yellow, plastic clothing peg on my nose. “What are you doing, silly?” she laughed and immediately took it off. “Aunt Nana’s making me a princess.” I replied. “Aunt Nana?” the laugh disappeared on her face. Then came the big fight between the sisters. When my mother was about to throw Aunt Nana out of the house together with her “stupid shenanigans”, the latter vehemently defended herself, “You see, if you peg her every day, one day the nose will remember the right position!” “No! *My* girl is not going to breathe with her mouth open like a gold fish!” Behind the slammed door, my mother took me in the arms and petted that red, flat nose. “Mama, it doesn’t hurt,” I mumbled, fingers rest on the princess Barbie’s pointy little nose.

So the chanting and squeezing stayed as a ritual between us. Thanks to my mother’s laborious efforts, my nose did grow a little higher, yet it never became an elegant one. While her chanting stopped as I grew too old for that, the squeezing ritual continued to evolve as my father started winning prizes for photography and editing one after another, and my mother pushing her career towards a department director title, and later a general manager. Gradually, we could afford new clothes for every season. And my mom would squeeze my nose after she buttoned me up. We moved into a better apartment in which my mom would always squeeze my nose before we had guests over. We bought our first car. And it was on my first ride on this very first car, my mom screamed “NOSE!” when I was pressing my nose against the window, excitedly waving to the strangers in neighboring cars. She gave me the strongest squeeze on the nose when she finally managed to peel me off the window.

During my teenage years my mom eventually stopped squeezing my nose, but the focus on it never faded. “Don’t spread your mouth that wide, your nose is as flat as a pancake.” “Don’t wear that make up, it makes your nose look even bigger.” “Wear these huge earrings, so people will not notice your nose.” “Why are you covering your face with your hair like that? Don’t you know all I can see is your stupid nose?” Though at first, it was my mother’s voice that I heard, but later on I found it came from a frustrated teenage girl yelling into a mirror. When other girls liberated their slender clavicles in V-neck tops, I packed my body in baggy dark turtle necks so when boys look at me, I can safely retract into the high collars. When I wanted to laugh, I turned away and laughed into my palms. Before the situations when I had to do a presentation in front of an audience with my naked face, I would always squeeze my nose like my mom used to do, in the vain hope that it would stay a bit higher, even if for just a few seconds.

Twenty-two years after my birth, at our dinner table, my parents asked what I wanted for my birthday. “How about a nose job?” I asked. That year, three of my close friends did either a double eyelids or a nose job. It seemed the last year of college was the ideal time to adjust one’s face, since the exciting post-college adult life would cover the imperfect past.

“Your nose looks great! People can tell that you are my daughter from that nose!” Dad protested. Chicken soup in his spoon almost spit out. “Glasses won’t fall, will they?” My mom asked, pecking peas into her mouth with chopsticks. “No, Mama, they won’t.” “Then you are good, sweetie.” “But...” “Is it because I called it flat when you were little? I was just kidding.” “For all those years?!” I almost yelled, metal spoon clanged in the bowl. How could she dismiss the seriousness in her eyes when she squeezed my nose

from time to time all so easily? How could she forget the tension on her forehead, when she frowned upon every little moment in my childhood when I carelessly spread my nose across my face? And how come something that bothered me for so long during my youth suddenly became a lighthearted “kidding”? The soup in my bowl turned cold. I stopped eating.

“Sweetie, we love you. So if you need that to feel good about yourself,” She paused, eyed my dad, whose nostrils flared into two disapproval vortexes, and continued, “then Mama will pay for it.” I opened my mouth, but no words came out. Something muzzled me. It was not financial support that I was asking for. And how could she make it my problem when she was the one who could not stop caring about it for so many years? I wanted to confront her with the damages she had done to me because of this nose. Yet suddenly at the tip of my tongue every “evidence” felt so piddling and, even, almost lovely when I tried to articulate. The warmth in mother’s arms, the smell of our first car, the laughter in our new apartment, the thrill for the new dress she bought for me, and her proud applause after I gave a successful speech – everything was blessed by a squeeze on the nose. For over twenty years, Mom and Dad have proved that it did not take a beautiful nose to plant a family’s peasant root in the urban soil. How can I demand an apology from my mother when she had spent all her vigor, energy and devotion to turn the curse into a blessing?

She spooned me another bowl of chicken soup. I held the bowl to my face. Tender, juicy steam blurred my nose. Dad stood up and walked to the stove, bringing everyone a glass of warm rice wine. They started talking about work, about an old artist friend’s new

studio, about another trip to a foreign land, about a future their daughter is going to have in a better country. I raised the glass with them. “Cheers!”

Sniff with a nose from him and taste with a mouth from her. The amber-like liquid flowed in me, a humble creature suffused with all the warmth and sweetness two ordinary human beings could possibly offer.